



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Kings Canyon National Park
Sequoia National Park
47050 Generals Highway
Three Rivers, California 93271-9651

IN REPLY REFER TO:

July 10, 2000

Dear Three Rivers Resident,

As part of my continuing commitment to provide fire information from Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (SEKI), I am happy to write our second-annual "Beginning of Fire Season" letter. Last year, I wrote this letter as a response to the 530 residents who answered our 1998 fire management survey and asked for more detailed fire information directly from the parks. This year, I have expanded the mailing to all Three Rivers households.

National News: Cerro Grande Fire – I want to begin by addressing a recent event that some of you may have followed: the Cerro Grande fire in New Mexico. The fire began on May 4 when the National Park Service ignited a burn in Bandelier National Monument. Within 24 hours, the fire was converted to a wildfire. Five days later, Cerro Grande became a national story as it burned hundreds of residences in Los Alamos and ultimately 47,650 acres in the surrounding area.

The National Park Service (NPS) takes full responsibility for the tragedy in Los Alamos. Our most pressing job now is to look closely at the national prescribed fire program and prevent a similar event from happening again. Bruce Babbitt, the Secretary of the Interior, took three immediate actions to start this process. First, in cooperation with the Agriculture Secretary, he initiated a 30-day prescribed fire moratorium for all federal agencies west of the 100th meridian. Second, Babbitt launched an independent investigation of Bandelier's prescribed fire. This report and other Cerro Grande information is available on the internet at www.nifc.gov/fireinfo/cerrogrande.html. Third, he commissioned the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) to complete an in-depth review of the NPS prescribed fire program. This review will take place during the next year.

While Cerro Grande occurred almost a thousand miles from where we live, I think it touched many of us very close to home. At least five employees from SEKI accepted fire assignments and traveled to New Mexico, including myself. I spent two weeks living in the South Fire Camp on the Los Alamos National Laboratory working with the media, Lab, and community during the enormous post-fire rehabilitation effort. It was an honor to contribute to that inter-agency project and help make a difference in that community.

What Does the Moratorium Mean for SEKI? – As expected, the prescribed fire moratorium was lifted for other federal agencies after one month, but extended indefinitely for the NPS. This moratorium will govern the activities at Sequoia and Kings Canyon this summer, just like the rest of the parks across the west. While there is a ban on prescribed fires, it is important to understand that lightning-ignited fires do not fall under the moratorium. If we receive lightning ignitions in the backcountry that do not threaten people or structures, the parks can manage these fires for resource benefit. The Kaweah Middle Fork drainage is one area, however, where we will not manage lightning ignitions. Superintendent Mike Tollefson has decided to continue our practice of suppressing all lightning ignitions below 8,000 feet in that drainage through the 2000 fire season.

Even with the moratorium, there is a large amount of work to be done in these parks. In the field, fire crews will continue with mechanical fuel reduction around buildings and picnic areas, and they will begin fireline construction around future burn segments. This preparation work, if

continued all summer, will put us an entire season ahead of schedule and will facilitate the completion of projects next year. Back at headquarters, SEKI managers will reexamine our own fire operation decision-making procedures. In addition to Secretary Babbitt's reviews, this exercise will allow us to make corrections, if necessary, right here at home.

What if the Moratorium is Lifted? – Each winter and spring, fire managers at SEKI go through a meticulous planning process to prepare for summer and fall burning. Despite the uncertainties surrounding NPS burning this season, we finalized our plans just as we would in a normal year. The proposed annual plan for 2000 includes 9 prescribed burn projects, totaling approximately 3,870 acres. As always, the completion of these burns will depend on weather, fuel moisture, air quality, and the availability of crews. The projects that are not completed will be carried over into the following year. Enclosed is a map showing the burn areas with descriptions of each location. If dates for ignitions are set this year, I will make them available through the regular methods (see accompanying page).

So, when the moratorium is lifted, we will have well-written burn plans in place and will be ready to begin operations responsibly. Fire managers in SEKI do not see the moratorium as an excuse to take a break, but rather a time for detailed planning and review. The national office is already accepting proposals from parks for burn projects after the moratorium has been lifted. SEKI's list has been sent and we hope to receive permission for several projects including a burn in Giant Forest called Bear Hill (see accompanying page).

Making Decisions for the Future – Now more than ever, Federal agencies and the public need to explore the issues of forest health. We all know that a century of fire suppression has created a hazardous fuel problem across the country. What tools are available to reverse these dangerous conditions? In recent Congressional hearings, we heard about two major tools: mechanical thinning (such as logging or chipping) and prescribed fire. The NPS recognizes that neither tool alone will solve the problem in all places under all conditions. Some ecosystems and conditions are suited for one strategy, while others might benefit from a mixture of methods. As this debate continues, consider that there are as many risks associated with inaction as there are with the execution of either tool mentioned above.

Ultimately, each agency or land manager must choose the appropriate strategies according to the ecosystem type, law, policy, and goals of their particular area. Here in Sequoia and Kings Canyon, we primarily use prescribed fire since 85% of this parkland is designated Wilderness. This designation does not allow road-building, and therefore precludes large-scale mechanical or logging operations. Just as importantly, decades of research shows that forest structure in Sierran ecosystems, especially with giant sequoias, can be restored with prescribed fire alone. While other areas might need mechanical treatments prior to burning, our best science shows this as an unnecessary step in meeting the goal of restoring ecosystems and perpetuating giant sequoias in these parks.

SEKI wants to reassure you about our ability to manage fire. As one of the oldest fire programs in the NPS, we want to be part of today's solution to earn your trust and confidence. Through national and local evaluations, we intend to insure that the SEKI fire program meets the highest standards for safety, planning, and implementation.

Sincerely,

Jody Lyle
Fire Information Officer

Enclosure: Prescribed burn project map with list